

MEET YOURSELF - THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN SELF AND THE CROSS (Mark 8:31 - 10:52)

Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Church, Steinbach, MB, February 20, 2005

Preamble:

The disciples had walked with Jesus for nearly three years. Even so, Mark portrays them as having a really hard time grasping who Jesus was and what he wanted. The way the disciples want to bring in the Kingdom is so diametrically opposed to the way Jesus calls them to work at it. That makes me wonder whether even today it is possible to “walk with Jesus” for many years without really “getting it” – that is without really understanding the way Jesus calls us to walk.

In this presentation I will attempt to get into the mind and heart of one of the disciples, Peter. I will try to feel his struggle in accepting the way of Jesus. As I play the role of Peter, I would like you to play your own role. Do you understand the way of Jesus? Could it be that in spite of a long journey with Jesus you still find it hard to wrap your mind and heart around the Jesus way?

Slow Learners

Hi! My name is Peter. I am one of the followers of Jesus. I follow Jesus around wherever he goes with at least 11 other men. Most people refer to us as Jesus' disciples. Actually there are often many more who follow this core group around - quite a band of people from every walk of life! Some of them Jesus has healed and they just stick around to learn more. Some of them are women, even a few rich women who often help pay our expenses.

We have all learned so much already. But I feel like I am just beginning to get to know Jesus. Sometimes, just when I think I have figured him out, he comes at us from left field with something he does or says that knocks me back on my heels. I feel like a slow-learner! I long so desperately to see Jesus and his vision more clearly, but I find it so hard to wrap my mind and heart around what he calls us to. I think many do.

In the past few weeks, for example, he seemed to keep focusing on bread. Once when there were 5000 men besides women and children gathered to hear Jesus teach, we suggested that he send them home because they were hungry. But he told us to feed them. All we could scrounge up were five barley loaves and two fish. But when Jesus blessed the little we had it was enough to meet everyone's needs.

But it was hard to learn the lesson of the loaves. A few weeks later Jesus again fed a large group of people - at least 4000 men plus their families. Right after that we were headed across the lake and all we had with us was one loaf and we were worried about what we would eat. Jesus seemed genuinely disturbed with our lack of understanding. "**After all these signs I have given you,**" he said with sad and weary eyes, "**Do you still not understand?**"

Those words burned in my heart. "**Do you not understand? Do you not see?**" Yes, I do - but no, I don't! Would I ever understand? Why is it so hard to understand Jesus? Why the struggle?

When we got to shore Jesus healed a blind man, putting spit on his eyes twice. Oh, if like that blind man I could have the scales removed from my eyes. I want to see you, Jesus for who you really are. I want know you! I do! Will I ever see where you are taking us? I went out that night and wept on the mountainside. "Yahweh, open my eyes that I can see the truth about this man, Jesus. Show me. Show me who he is and what he wants!

Sometime later we were on our way to Caesarea Philipi. My mind was dwelling on these unresolved questions as we walked along. Suddenly, without warning, Jesus asked, "**Who do men say that I am?**" We told him what we had heard people say. Some had speculated that he might be John the Baptist or Elijah returned to life. But then he stopped in his tracks, and it seemed as though he looked right at me as he asked, "**But who do you say that I am?**"

Why, that was my question! How could I answer that? I was quiet for a long time. My mind raced and my heart quickened its pace. Before me flashed the months of our life together. All the doubts and fears - the joys, the miracles, the teachings. Suddenly, it all flowed together into one beautiful picture. I felt within me a surge of faith and purity and wholeness. From out of the depth of my being welled up the answer to all my uncertainties. "**You are the Christ!**" I blurted out.

I said it, and I believed it. Jesus was the Christ! He was God become man. How that could be, I didn't know. But for that one brief moment faith had the upper hand and I saw the Lord of heaven and earth. It seemed that life could not be the same from that moment on. Surely, everything would have to be measured against this divine moment. I had seen who Jesus was!

Round One

We walked on. Presently we came to a large tree and we stopped to rest in its shade. Jesus began to teach us as he did so often during such rest breaks. But this time there was something different. He began to tell us that "**...he would have to suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again**".

"Hold it right there, Chief," I thought to myself. Hadn't I just recognized Jesus as the Christ, who would be bringing hope to troubled Israel - to deliver us from the Roman oppression? And here he was - talking about suffering and death. Now I was really confused! The Messiah promised of old - suffering and dying? How could he then deliver my people?

I made an excuse to call Jesus apart a little and rebuked him. Oh, I didn't say any harsh words. I just told him that what he had just said didn't make any sense. That if he was to be of any use to our beleaguered people he would have to speak of other things - not suffering and death. Give us more of a rock'em sock'em message.

We were standing off to one side of our group and I don't know if any others heard what I had said. But as I remember it now, Jesus swung around with deliberate speed. He looked first at me, then at the rest behind me, and then back at me. His eyes had lost their usual tenderness. Instead they seemed to be ablaze with intense fire. And I was frozen by their piercing gaze. "**Get behind me Satan. For you are not on the side of God, but on the side of men!**"

I was crushed. A little bit ago I had called him God. Now he called me Satan. Maybe he had spoken directly to Satan, I don't know. But even if that were the case, he had insinuated that my ideas were linked more with Satan than with God. My first inclination was to come back with another rebuke! I don't back down easily, you know. But as I looked again at Jesus standing there in our midst, I knew that he was in charge. I knew that I was standing in the very presence of God. I had nothing to say. Not one word to defend my way of doing things. My way of finding life. My way of using power and strength to conquer the enemy. I bowed my head in submission. We all did.

Others had gathered around us by this time, and Jesus began explaining more clearly to all of us what he meant by all his talk about suffering and death. He said, **"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's, will save it."**

There it was. Clear as a bell - the Jesus Way! Opposite to my natural inclinations. Leave it to people like me and we think we must conquer by means of brute force. But Jesus says the way forward - even the way to save one's life - is to take up the cross. As a matter of fact he says that is the only way. It is God's way! I'm not sure that I understood it all. In fact I know I didn't. But I had caught a glimpse - at least for a moment - of the Jesus way. It seemed so different. So new. Yet in a startling way, so simple. But could I embrace that view? I didn't know. I was so far from that way of thinking. I would have to learn. So help me God!

Round Two

It seemed that Jesus knew we just didn't get it - the way of the cross - that is. So he brought up the subject again and again in the next while. One time when we were passing through Galilee he repeated exactly what he had said earlier about having to die on a cross and being raised after three days. By this time that moment in which I had seen the purity of that way had faded into the background of my mind. It was so hard to hang on to that image!

Jesus' words just grated on me like rough sandpaper. None of us really understood what he was talking about. And we were all afraid to ask. We were such slow learners, I guess. And I didn't relish looking into those fierce eyes of Jesus again. Let alone be referred to as Satan, or hearing the suggestion that I was working in concert with him.

Some time later, while we were on our way through Galilee, we began to argue among ourselves. (Jesus was some distance behind us, so we thought we could say what we wanted without him hearing.) "I think I'm more important to Jesus than you are," Andrew said to John. Boy, did that get under my skin! To see my kid brother being so rude really got my goat, and I let him have it. "Besides," I hissed at him, "seeing I'm older than you, and have more administrative skills than you, and seeing that I get to talk to Jesus more than some of you wimps, I wouldn't be surprised if I were most important to Jesus!"

Things really got out of hand - everyone trying to come out on top of the pile. When I think about it now it all seems so stupid. We were all selfish, everyone thinking only about his own importance. When we got to the house where we were planning to stay in Capernaum, we all sat down to rest in the large living room. Jesus had been unusually quiet for quite a while and now he looked around at

all of us, I thought with deep sadness in his eyes. Then he said, **"What were you discussing on the way?"**

We looked at one another sheepishly and our hearts sank. James got out his handkerchief and blew his nose. Andrew pretended to be absorbed in fixing his sandal that had come undone during the day. I looked out at the traffic in the street. There was a strange silence. We knew that Jesus knew. What could we say?

Jesus got up and left for a while. When he returned he had a small child in his arms. He set him down on his knee, bounced him around a few times, and then gave him a big hug, which the child eagerly returned. This kibitzing around broke the uncomfortable silence.

I thought about how different we were than this child. The child seemed so humble, so open to love, so ready to be fascinated. I knew that in our culture children don't have many rights, let alone power. Just as I was thinking these thoughts, Jesus looked up. His eyes swept the room, stopping briefly to connect with the eyes of each of us. Then he said softly, **"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives not me, but him who sent me."** And as though to drive home the point, **"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."**

It was a beautiful moment there. The child in our midst. A lesson before our eyes. And I saw again for a moment the absolute purity of the Jesus way. Not the way of our self-centered strivings to get to the top of the pile - but the way of the trusting child with no recourse to claim his rights.

Round Three

Some time later, we were headed in the direction of Jerusalem. None of us really wanted to go there. We had heard rumors that if Jesus set foot inside Jerusalem the authorities would nab him. If that happened we were all convinced that the party would be over. But Jesus kept pushing ahead, as though he were eager to walk into the trap that had been set for him. We were amazed at his courage and followed him only at a distance.

As we followed along I noticed something going on between James and John. They had separated themselves from the rest of us a bit and were talking to each other in quiet tones. My suspicion proved to be correct because after a few minutes they quickened their pace to catch up to Jesus, obviously to ask him something. I quickened my pace too, as did most of the others. We wanted to hear what they would be asking of Jesus. Just as I got within earshot, I heard one of them say, **"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory."**

Ay-yay-yay! Did that turn up the hair on the back of my neck! The audacity of those creatures! Secretly jockeying for position of superiority once Jesus would have rid Palestine of those pesky Romans. I let them know what I thought of them, and I didn't speak quietly either, by the way. Just think of it, these two low-lifers trying to get one up on me. If anyone would be sitting at the right hand of the Messiah in his glory it would be me. Hadn't I demonstrated often enough that I have more natural leadership skills than the two of them combined? They should know that by now! We were nose to nose and the first punch was already in the making.

Suddenly Jesus pushed his way between us, separating madmen like a referee separates Roman hockey players on the ice when they get into a fight. **"Listen, all of you - James, John, Peter - the whole bunch! You all sound like Gentiles who haven't even heard of the ways of God. You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."**

There it was again. That other way! That up-side-down way. Instead of seeking to dominate others, serving them. Finding greatness by being a slave. All my confusion of the past rushed back to me in one giant tsunami wave. That other way! That way I find so hard to wrap around my mind, let alone my heart. The way in which you take up the cross instead of using power and strength to protect yourself. The way in which you become a trusting child instead of insisting on your rights. The way in which greatness is measured by servanthood.

Now I See It...

And then, as had happened on only a few occasions before, the scales of doubt and fear and confusion suddenly slid from my eyes. And I saw for a moment the absolute purity and wholeness of that way. It seemed as though Yahweh himself had pulled back a curtain and I could see for a brief moment that the Jesus way was the way of abundant life. I could see that Jesus wasn't trying to be hard on me. He was trying to get me to see the way we were meant to live. Not just women. Men too! Wow! He was showing us what it takes to be a man of courage and integrity

That was a beautiful moment. I felt something like I think Isaiah must have felt when he saw the Lord in the temple. I was overcome. I would have liked to fall down before Jesus and praise his name for having shown me the way to life. But something held me back. What was it? As I wrestled with this thought the vision began to fade before my eyes again. It was slipping through my fingers.

Now I Don't...

I wanted to stop it. To hold it. To look at it some more. But there was a struggle going on at the core of my being. It was a struggle between the way I wanted to bring in the Kingdom and the way Jesus called me to work at it. And the more I struggled and the more I hesitated, the faster the vision seemed to slip away from me.

I thought of being a **servant**. Menial tasks. Little pay. Often not receiving credit for a job well done. Others being in authority. Not being your own boss. No, Lord, no! How can I be a servant? I want to have a life of my own. Are the Gentiles completely wrong to climb the pyramid? Somebody has to be in charge, and couldn't it just as well be me?

Then I thought of the **child**. I was a child once. But since I became a man I put away childish things. I like to talk about how to keep a boat from being swamped in a storm. About the stock market, investments and profit. About how to get rid of the Romans off our backs. Theology. The Kingdom of God. Meaning in history.... A child doesn't know about such important things. A child simply trusts - doesn't care all that much what others think as long as he knows he is loved. A child

in our world has few rights. He has to do what he is told. How can I, Peter - the fisherman turned leader in our group of disciples - become like a child? That beats me.

And there it is - the **cross**. I saw a murderer crucified once. Naked, vulnerable, bleeding, contorted, despised, rejected. Oh, it was such a shameful disgrace. How can that way lead to life? You don't find life by taking up a cross! That takes you to death! I want to take my chances while I have them. I want to pursue life to find life.

And just like that the whole picture was gone. That picture that had for a moment thrilled my senses and raised my sights to new horizons. It was gone! It had slipped through my fingers! I had seen it though! I swear I saw it. For a moment I had seen the unity of God's purpose - the wholeness of his way - the beauty of his holiness.

Would I Ever...?

But in the context of the struggle between my way and the Jesus way it had faded out of sight. I fell on my face and wept. I was torn between the two ways. I wanted God's way, but I also wanted my way!

Perhaps some day I will be able to see that beautiful picture once again. And maybe - Oh God help me - just maybe the Spirit of God will so indwell me that I cannot only see it, but hold it, and keep it from slipping between my fingers.

And maybe someday, once I am able to wrap the Jesus way around my heart and mind, I will be able to live that way as well. Please God. Please.

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